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ABSTRACT

A case study of the use of reflexive constructions by a Spanish-speaking child from age 2;5.2 to 3;5.2 is presented. Sixty hours of audiotaped utterances were recorded monthly over a one year period. The utterances are analyzed in terms of self-induced actions, impersonal constructions, and two-argument predicates. The data show the regular occurrence of adult reflexive patterns in the child's speech but with errors and restricted uses that indicate incomplete comprehension of the constructions. It is suggested that by age 3;6, the child is using reflexive constructions with only a prototypical meaning. This prototypical usage represents the first developmental stage in the use of the reflexive, the primary function of which is to denote an entity affected by the action mentioned in the verb. However, further meanings of the reflexive which establish a speaker perspective on an event are not fully understood at this stage. (RW)

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THE SEMANTICS OF A CHILD'S USE OF REFLEXIVES IN SPANISH [1]

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The reflexive marker in Spanish is a multifaceted syntactic device. This study describes how a child between the ages of 2;5.2 and 3;5.2 uses reflexive constructions. The data show that although the reflexive appears in a variety of discourse contexts, it is not clear that the child's grammatically correct utterances marked by a reflexive reveal an adult-like understanding of the construction. The ability to produce a form correctly is often taken to mean that the child has worked out the set of rules that an adult draws on when using the same form. However, the correct production of a form may mask the extent to which the child's comprehension of that form is incomplete (Karmiloff-Smith, 1979).

While this child's use of the reflexive construction becomes more sophisticated between the ages of 2;5.2 and 3;5.2, she has not yet acquired all its functions. By 2;8, with the exception of the plural use, all the adult reflexive patterns appear regularly in the child's speech. Nevertheless, the child's errors and restricted uses indicate that her hypotheses concerning the functions of the reflexive construction are only partially correct.

The reflexive in Spanish

One of the best descriptions of the functions of the reflexive can be found in Bull (1965: 265): "Spanish uses the reflexive construction not only to indicate that the subject entity acts upon itself but to show overtly that no other entity is responsible for the event." In other words, Bull's argument is that the reflexive is used to show that only the noun phrase in subject position, and not an implied agent, is held accountable for the action.

Inherent in the meaning of the reflexive then, is the central notion of 'entity affected'. For example, in the utterance Yo me lavo 'I wash myself', yo 'I' is the entity affected by the action lavo 'I-wash'. Thus, the primary use of the reflexive, like any kind of object construction, is to highlight the relationship between an action and the entity affected by that action. Let me then make the following two points about reflexive constructions: (1) because the reflexive agrees in person and number with the grammatical subject, it signals that subject as the recipient of the action encoded by the verb; and (2) reflexive constructions topicalize an 'entity affected.'

Since it has been noted that the relationship between actions and their results is linguistically marked by children in their earliest speech (Bronkart and Sinclair, 1973; Antinucci and Miller, 1976), there is reason to think that this relationship is conceptually basic for the child. The most "conceptually salient" events or situations have been described by Slobin (1981: 185) as "prototypical". He cites the giving and taking of objects as an example of one such prototypical event, and argues that the forms used to encode this and other such events are "canonical": "They are the most basic forms available in a language." I propose here that in Spanish, the reflexive construction is a canonical form encoding the prototypical notion of 'entity affected'.

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My argument is that when the child first uses the reflexive, she uses it to mark this notion. She recognizes that the reflexive construction signals the entity affected by the verb's action in an explicit way. She does not, however, recognize that the reflexive works primarily with verbs that express a 'change of state'. The child's need to find a formal device that marks an 'affected' may arise because in Spanish, the coding for the subject entity is always conflated in the meaning of the verb. Therefore, it is not surprising that she would seek a way in her language to map one meaning onto one form. Evidence for this are her frequent uses of the reflexive to mark the notion of 'entity affected' in contexts where this marking is incorrect. Such misuses provide clues to the way the child has organized the relationship between form and meaning. Of particular significance are errors produced around the age of 3;5. These errors reveal that forms used correctly earlier, may not have expressed the refinements of meaning that are part of the adult usage. Restrictions in the use of the reflexive also point to the child's incomplete understanding of the multiple functions of the construction. Accordingly, I propose that between 2;5.2 and 3;5.2, the child has not yet teased apart the many functions of the reflexive, but is, in fact, using the construction with a prototypical meaning only.

Method

The child studied here is a female, monolingual speaker of a Mexican variety of Spanish. Her utterances were audiorecorded when she was past the two-word stage and using verb forms regularly in her speech. These audiosamples were collected on a monthly basis, yielding approximately 60 hours of data. Transcripts of the child's utterances were supplemented by notes taken between interview sessions. The data were then classified according to types of reflexive constructions. Before considering that a reflexive construction was productive in the child's speech, she had to have produced the construction with different verbs on at least two occasions during an interview.

Findings

Depending on the lexical aspect, that is, the aktionsart of the reflexive verb and the animacy of the sentence subject, reflexive utterances can have six pragmatic interpretations. These interpretations show six distinct ways of viewing an event, and correspond to the following grammatical constructions: (1) a transitive verb with an animate subject; (2) an intransitive verb with an animate subject; (3) an intransitive verb with an inanimate subject; (4) a transitive verb with an inanimate subject; (5) a transitive verb with an animate object; and (6) a transitive verb with a count noun object.

The discourse function of each of these constructions in light of the child data will now be considered. It is important to point out here that the reflexivized verbs cited from the data were also produced by the child in non-reflexive constructions, either prior to the age reported in the example or at this same age. In fact, most reflexivized verbs produced during the time of the study were used by the child contrastively. In this way, it cannot be argued that she treats the reflexive as an unanalyzed form fused to the verb. Four of the Operating Principles pro-

posed by Slobin (1973) will be useful here since they underscore the child's problem of mapping meaning onto form. These principles describe preferences for marking underlying meanings clearly and overtly in surface syntax (OP E); for avoiding homonymous forms (OP E3); for using grammatical markers that make semantic sense (OP G); and for using grammatically consistent rules (OP G3).

A. Self-induced actions

According to Bull, the primary function of the Spanish reflexive is to indicate that the entity in subject position performs an action on itself. The data support this contention, and show that the child first uses reflexive constructions to indicate that she is affected by her own action, or that another individual is affected by his or her own action.

One way the child uses the reflexive construction is with transitive verbs having an animate subject. In the singular, these verbs do not pose a problem in acquisition since all transitive verbs can be reflexivized, as in:

1. (2;7.1) Me piqué. (The child has hurt her hand
1s-refl I-pinched on the shutter of a taperecorder)
'I pinched myself.'

This situation is in keeping with Slobin's observation that "semantically consistent grammatical rules are acquired early and without significant error" (1973: 203). But even when the child's general usage of the reflexive is correct, her occasional errors reveal the incompleteness of her underlying assumptions about the form. In the following example, she has incorrectly marked an utterance with a reflexive to emphasize her own accomplishment of an action:

2. (2;7.2) *Ya me bañé. (The child has just bathed her
Now 1s-refl I-bathed doll.)
'I (emphasis) bathed (the doll).'

The child's treatment of reflexive constructions with plural transitive verbs will now be considered. When these constructions take animate subjects they are homonymous with reciprocal constructions[2]:

I. Los niños se peinan { a sí mismos. / d.o.mkr. themselves ; el uno al otro / the one to-the other }
the boys 1p-refl they-comb-the-hair

'The boys comb their (own) hair.'
'The boys comb each other's hair.'

So this utterance has two semantic readings, each of which can be disambiguated by an optional noun phrase.

In the child data, the reflexive marker is never used in a plural context with transitive verbs, that is, in a linguistic environment where it is semantically ambiguous. What this suggests is that the child is selecting one lexical item to encode one meaning. Thus, her treatment of the plural reflexive supports Slobin's contention that young language learners avoid forms that are homonymous.

A second pragmatic use of the reflexive is with intransitive verbs having an animate subject. Like semantically transitive verbs, intransitive verbs can also be used with a reflexive to show that an action is self-induced. In fact, reflexive constructions with intransitive verbs are the first to appear in the data. In this function, however, the reflexive marking is frequently overextended. These overextensions occur because in an intransitive context, reflexivization applies only to a subset of verbs to emphasize that an animate subject, as Bull says, "exerts itself in some special way to bring about an event" (271). Consequently, when a reflexive accompanies an intransitive verb, it adds a new aspectual or semantic component to that verb, as in dormir 'to sleep' - dormirse 'to fall asleep', and ir 'to go' - irse 'to depart'. The problem for the child then, is to determine which intransitive verbs admit a reflexive. It would be expected that a child learning Spanish would need time to acquire this specific lexical information, and therefore would overgeneralize the use of the reflexive with intransitive verbs. The data bear out this prediction:

(The child's aunt comes in the front door.)

3. (2;5.2) Mira Sara allí. *Se agó (=llegó).
2s-fam-look-at-IMPER Sara there 3s-refl she-arrived
'Look at Sara over there. She arrived.'

Another overextended use of the reflexive appears in the late samples with plural intransitive verbs. An error of this kind is particularly noteworthy because it signals the discrepancy between a correct early use of the reflexive and its incorrect late use with the same verb:

(The child is commenting on some picture cards she is holding.)

4. (3;5.2) *Se van juntada (=juntas)
3s-refl they-leave together
'They go/belong together.'

Compare this example with the one below:

5. (2;5.2) Me voy. (The child is pretending to leave her
1s-refl I-leave apartment.)
'I'm leaving.'

There is still a third way the child uses the reflexive construction to show that an action has been self-induced. Here, it appears with both transitive and intransitive verbs and with both animate and inanimate subjects. The point of view encoded by this reflexive construction is that the grammatical subject involuntarily produces an action on itself. Thus, the action is interpreted as happening to

the entity in the subject slot. The reflexivization of a certain class of verbs then, causes these verbs to have an inchoative sense--a sense of becoming, and they are used to underscore the process that affects the grammatical subject.

The data show that the child produces the inchoative construction on a limited basis, but with its full range of syntactic possibilities. Caer 'to fall' is the inchoativized verb occurring most often in the data, primarily with an inanimate subject but on occasion, with an animate one. Let me point out in passing, though, that in Spanish, reflexivization of an intransitive verb with an inanimate subject is obligatory. This is because the language encodes a change of state action with an inanimate entity in subject position from a semantically transitive perspective: The action is perceived as happening to that entity. Thus, the obligatory reflexivization of a verb with an inanimate subject is a formal factor that may contribute to the perceptual salience of the reflexive construction for the young learner of Spanish. But this formal marking does not explain the fact that no errors were recorded with inchoativized verbs. One of the child's inchoative utterances appears below:

6. (2;7.1) No se cae. (The child has placed a cup
Not 3s-refl it-falls of Coca Cola on her MacDonald's
'It won't fall here.' tray.)

B. Impersonal constructions

The impersonal uses of the reflexive constitute a fourth pragmatic function. In this context, the primary function of the reflexive--to show that an action is self-induced--is extended. The point of view expressed by an impersonal construction is that the action encoded by the verb has an indefinite causal agent, which is unimportant to the message. In this way, the object of an implied transitive utterance is regarded as the entity that accounts for the event. In that the action affecting the entity in subject position is considered to happen to that entity, impersonal constructions adopt the same point of view as inchoative utterances. But in inchoative utterances, the agent and the affected are identical whereas in impersonal utterances they are not. Impersonal constructions then, are middle voice constructions since they always occur in the third person, and they eliminate or defocus what would be the agent in an active or passive voice utterance (cf. Bull: 270). Examples of possible impersonal constructions in the adult language are shown below. In II, an inanimate logical object has become the surface subject of the syntactically intransitive utterance. So the verb agrees in person and number with this subject:

II. Se abren las puertas a las siete (por el conserje).
3s-refl they-open the doors at the seven by the concierge
'The doors open/get opened at seven o'clock (by the concierge).'

In III, to avoid homonymy with reflexive constructions of the type shown in IV, an animate logical object is lexicalized as the surface object:

III. Se retrató a los actores (por Avedon).
3s-refl someone-photographed d.o.mkr the actors by Avedon
'The actors were/got photographed (by Avedon).

Here, the logical object is treated as the psychological subject. Compare this construction with the one below, where the agreement between an animate subject and its verb encodes an action that is self-induced:

IV. Se retrataron los actores.
3s-refl they-photographed the actors
'The actors photographed themselves.'

Although the child produces a number of impersonal constructions with inanimates in subject position, no impersonal constructions with animates in object position were recorded during the 12-month period of the study. Once again, this finding can be explained by Slobin's Operating Principle E--that underlying meanings should be overtly marked. The surface semantic interpretation for an impersonal construction with an animate NP in object position (III) is the same as that for an inanimate NP in subject position (II). But only in II does the subject NP show a one-to-one correspondence between form and underlying meaning. Therefore, a child acquiring Spanish should use inanimate NP's in impersonal constructions before animate NP's. Example (7) shows one such child use of the impersonal construction:

7. Se abe (=abre). (The child is referring to the
3s-refl it-opens shutter of a taperecorder.)
'It opens/gets opened.'

C. Two-argument predicates

Thus far, the use of the reflexive in syntactically intransitive constructions has been considered. An exception to the intransitive pattern must now be discussed. This exception is especially significant because it indicates clearly the child's faulty analysis of the meaning of the reflexive. Shortly before 2;8, a reflexive appears in the child's speech in a syntactically transitive pattern to focus the verb's activity away from the grammatical object and onto the grammatical subject. The pattern works only with count, and not mass nouns, though, because only countable objects can undergo a complete change of state. (It was pointed out earlier that the reflexive occurs primarily with verbs expressing a change-of-state action.) In this way, when the reflexive is used in a transitive pattern, it short-circuits the verb's potential to affect the grammatical object. Thus, the point of view encoded by the construction is that the grammatical object is more of a circumstantial item than an affected. So for two-argument constructs with a reflexive, it can be argued that the subject is always a high information lexical item and the object a low information lexical item. Transitive utterances with a reflexive,then, serve the same discourse function as many one-argument reflexive predicates; they encode a change-of-state action from the perspective of the entity affected by that action, and

defocus any other potentially affected element. But reflexives can occur in transitive constructs only when the semantics of the verb indicates that the grammatical subject can be more affected by its own action than the grammatical object. For example, a verb such as abrazar 'to hug' in the transitive sentence Yo abrazé al bebé 'I hugged the baby' would not be able to undergo reflexivization since the meaning of the verb implies that its direct object is an obligatorily 'affected'.

When using the reflexive with two-argument predicates, the child frequently overextends the form to mark stative verbs and verbs whose semantics exclude reflexivization. This suggests that once again, she is attending strictly to the notion of 'entity affected', as in:

8. *No	me	lo	quiero todavía.	(The child is telling
not	ls-refl	it-masc	I-want yet	the examiner that she
'I (emphasis)	don't	**want it**	yet.'	doesn't want to play
				with her doll yet.)

Therefore, it can be said that the child is using a grammatical marker in a way that makes sense to her, but not necessarily to an adult speaker of Spanish.

Conclusions

The data show that of all expressions of self-induced actions, the child, between the ages of 2;5,2 and 3;5,2, prefers to make intransitive verbs semantically transitive by marking them with a reflexive. Second, the reflexivization of transitive verbs in the singular reveals that although these verb forms are produced by the child without significant error, they do not, in fact, show an adult understanding of the forms. Third, inchoativized verbs, which are acquired by the child with virtually no error, may point to a similar incomplete understanding of the reflexive construction. Fourth, in the plural, where homonymy occurs, the child does not produce any plural transitive verbs. This restricted performance lends support to the idea that young language learners look to map one meaning onto one form. Consistent with this viewpoint, the child studied here may have avoided the reflexive with plural verbs because it is semantically ambiguous. Fifth, possibly for the same reason, the child also avoids impersonal constructions in which an animate grammatical object is understood to be the sentence subject. (When an animate noun phrase in direct object position is treated as the psychological subject, there is not a one-to-one correspondence between form and function.) Sixth, shortly before 2;8, the child begins to extend the basic syntactic pattern for reflexives to include two-argument predicates with count-noun objects. This extended use suggests that the child is now choosing between two complementary grammatical options: (a) a non-reflexive construction, which focuses on the grammatical object's involvement with the action; and (b) a reflexive construction, which focuses on the grammatical subject's involvement with the action. The reflexive pattern is selected by the child because it shows that the entity most affected by the action mentioned in the verb is the sentence subject. In this pattern, however, the reflexive marking is overextended.

The child, then, uses the reflexive construction in a way that conforms to her system of rules, but not necessarily to the one used

by an adult. Thus, even though she produces many reflexive utterances that are grammatically correct, this correctness is fortuitous, and does not demonstrate a complete understanding of the reflexive construction. (A similar conclusion, based on data from French speaking children's use of determiners, was drawn by Karmiloff-Smith, 1979). Consequently, the case of the reflexive shows that the child's use of the construction is not based on the same underlying assumptions as those of the adult.

The data presented here describe what I believe is the first developmental stage in the use of the reflexive, namely, the prototypical usage. Its primary function is to denote an 'entity affected' by the action mentioned in the verb. But the further meanings--inchoativeness, reciprocity, and impersonality extend this core meaning of the reflexive and establish a speaker perspective on an event. These notions appear not to be fully understood until some later stage.

The present data leave many questions unanswered on the acquisition of the reflexive. At 3;5,2, the child in this study has not yet teased apart all its functions. But when and how she will consider further meanings encoded by this form, or in what order these meanings will be unmasked, has yet to be established.

Notes

1. I'd like to thank Professors Eve V. Clark, Robert L. Politzer, and Dan I. Slobin for their critical comments on earlier versions of this paper. I'd also like to thank Anne Garvey and Mark Cobler for their editorial suggestions.
2. Utterances preceded by a Roman numeral are possible adult constructions.

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